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SCHOOLSCAPES

WORKING TOGETHER
TO INSTRUCT, SOCIALIZE AND PROVIDE QUALIFICATIONS

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Québec

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With the education reform, schools have opened their doors to the community more than ever before. Partnerships have sprung up and are front row and centre in efforts to promote students' success. It is important to remember, however, that the very heart of the reform is found in the aims, cross-curricular competencies, broad areas of learning, subject areas and subject-specific programs of the Québec Education Program. When teachers plan learning and evaluation, they must take all these aspects of the QEP into account. In this issue, two secondary school science teachers present projects they have developed for this context.

Since 2002, the intervention strategy *New Approaches, New Solutions (NANS)* has been helping schools in disadvantaged communities to increase their students' success rate. *Schoolscapes* checked in with representatives of two schools—one urban, one rural—to see how their NANS projects were evolving.

And last but not least, this issue includes articles on integrating students with difficulties into the regular classroom, reading and interdisciplinary projects.

Colette Boucher

Gilbert Moisan, Service de la recherche,
Direction de la recherche, des statistiques et des indicateurs, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport

RESEARCH ON STUDENT RETENTION AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

This column is aimed at providing teachers and other school team members with information about recent research and at fostering the concrete application of these results in schools.

Last February, a new call for research projects was launched in the scientific community. All of the research priorities listed are directly related to the ultimate goal of the Ministère's research program, i.e. to improve student retention and academic success. The new research projects funded through the competition will begin in January 2007.

Several research priorities correspond to concerns raised in the *Schoolscapes* survey conducted among teachers in 2004. The new research priorities fall under three themes, which are outlined on page 2.1.

The Research Program: Student Retention and Academic Success was set up in 2002 in order to support research to identify factors that foster student retention and academic success. It is managed jointly with the Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC).

Researchers are independent of the Ministère and retain their academic freedom. In all, the 2002-2003, 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 competitions resulted in the funding of 64 research projects.

For more information on the program, consult the Web site of the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport:

http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/lancement/prog_recherche/

SCHOOLSCAPES

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Pierre Bergevin, Assistant Deputy Minister
Secteur de l'éducation préscolaire, de l'enseignement primaire et secondaire

Margaret Rioux-Dolan, Director, Direction générale de la formation des jeunes

In conjunction with the Services à la communauté anglophone

Noel Burke, Assistant Deputy Minister
Secteur des Services à la communauté anglophone

Liette Michaud-Hedge, Director
Direction de la production en langue anglaise

Editor-in-Chief: *Colette Boucher*

Coordinator: *Martine Labrie*

Publication Assistant: *Denise Thériault*

Journalists: *Colette Boucher, Réjane Bougé, Marie-Josée Lépine, Gilbert Moisan, Frances Moyle, Louis-P. Huard, Hélène Katz, Ève Renaud, Liz Warwick*

Translation and Revision: *Direction de la production en langue anglaise*

Photographer: *Denis Garon*

Graphic Design: *Emmanuel Bégin*

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The new research priorities fall under three themes.

I – Accompaniment of change and institutional management

- Management and the accompaniment of change
- Preparing a new generation of teachers and managers
- Structures and conditions that foster continuity and cooperation in the implementation of educational services

II – Instructional approaches and progression through school

- Differentiated instruction in various forms and its use in fostering the development of competencies, and teachers' training needs given the heterogeneous makeup of regular classes
- The adaptation of different approaches for evaluating competencies and the development of evaluation instruments adapted to students' specific needs
- The relationship between occupational competencies and the attitudes of school staff with respect to actions intended to foster academic success in disadvantaged communities

III – Student-centred educational intervention

- Factors that influence career choices, as well as the conditions for implementing innovative practices to help students make career choices and the effects of these practices
- Personal and family difficulties related to the construction of values among Secondary Cycle Two students, in particular psychological distress, suicidal behaviour, violence at school, homophobia and problems related to sexual activity
- Effects of the school and family environment, including the school culture and climate, the support of family and friends, student services and extracurricular activities

Student Researchers

Marie-Josée Lépine

Loss of Ground

In 2004, Hurricane Jeanne hit Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Although the storm hit hardest on the Dominican side of the island, Gonaives, Haiti, definitely suffered the worst damage. Geneviève Landry, a teacher at École Félix-Leclerc, suggested that her students try to find out why. Not as easy as one might think!

In collaboration with the experiment design development team, which is made up of education consultants, the Secondary I teacher developed the project, inspired by a real-life event, and tested it in the classroom.

"I introduced the project with a newspaper article about the disaster. I also distributed maps showing that the two countries are on the same island." Once she was sure that the students understood the text, she gave them four periods to gather the tools necessary to explain the problem.

Students paired up and looked for information on the Internet and in books. They soon learned that the landslides in the Gonaives region were responsible for the damage. "The students then needed to identify the causes of the landslides. They had to determine what they already knew about the different types of soils and assess what they needed to find out."

The students also conducted traditional experiments in order to learn why the soil in the Gonaives region no longer retained water. They acquired considerable knowledge about the production of humus, its role in soil and the impact of deforestation. According to Landry, her role was to supervise the students and provide direction, not to give them answers. "It's up to the students to make connections," she says, "to organize the different elements and explain the problem. The aim of the project is to have them formulate their own questions."

Closer to Home

"Once the students understood the impact of deforestation, I could bring the topic round to something more familiar. Our climate is rapidly changing, and with the tools they acquired in this project, they are able to gain a better understanding of what's happening here."

Questions and Observations

Throughout the project, the students wrote down their questions, observations and methods in a log book. At the end of the year, they will have all of their notes about the different learning situations they encountered, so they will be able to assess what they learned during the course.

According to Landry, the new program offers an opportunity to tackle more concrete subjects. This type of activity, which stimulates students' interest and convinces them of the need to become involved, gives meaning to their learning. By exploring different avenues, students also learn to become more autonomous. Says Geneviève Landry, "the goal for my students was to formulate questions in order to be able to understand the problem."

Success!

"The very first time I saw the new program, I realized that it reflected who I am and how I see teaching. I needed to do projects with my students. What really convinced me was seeing their reactions. I had never seen students so motivated and wide-eyed. They wanted to try new things. Regardless of the difficulties involved, students feed off our motivation."

What's In a Hairball?

You are given a pellet of unknown composition. Your tools? The scientific method, the knowledge needed to use tongs and picks, and a scale. How will you go about identifying the substances that make up the pellet? This is the challenge that Marie-Josée Touchette's Secondary I science and technology students face at École Casavant.

The students pair off and work together to identify the nature and origin of the pellet in the piece of aluminum foil their teacher gave them. They will have to do research in order to determine that it is an owl pellet—a sterilized collection of tiny bones and hair regurgitated by the bird.

"The project takes about four or five periods," says the teacher. "The first step is for the students to observe the pellet and tell me, at first glance, what they think it might be."

Then they take the pellet apart, compare hypotheses and ask questions. Throughout the project, each student notes his or her impressions in a log book, which is evaluated by the teacher at the end of the project.

Touchette lets the students examine the pellet for several hours before providing them with a document she prepared. The document contains information about the food chain and different shapes of animal teeth. "In this project," she concludes, "students acquire knowledge about the food chain, different types of animals, and skeletons."

As soon as the students realize that the pellet is made up of tiny bones, they must find out what kind of animal they come from, referring to tables illustrating the bones of different rodents.

Moving Right Along . . .

The project leads to a number of questions about human anatomy. Do we have as many ribs as rodents do? Are our bones made the same way? Do our teeth ever stop growing? To satisfy her students' curiosity, Touchette compares the human skeleton with those of different rodents.

Students are very enthusiastic about the project. "I'm new in this school," says Touchette, "so the students didn't expect this type of project. Secondary II and III students sometimes drop by to see what's happening in my classroom. It's a simple project, but students love it! They participate more actively, especially the boys. They appear to be more focused than they used to be. Sometimes I feel like doing something different, but the students' enthusiasm for this project makes it worth repeating a few more times."

"The very first time I saw the new program, I realized that it reflected who I am and how I see teaching."

nn Taylor wondered the same thing and approached officials at Riverside School Board. "Adam was always in an inclusive school environment and had very similar aspirations to everyone else in his class, which was to get a job, get married and have a family," she says. "We saw Adam as being fairly independent and living in the community. He had his own personal objectives and we felt they would be more easily accomplished in an inclusive environment. He had a tremendous desire to move forward along with his peers and we felt that as a family we needed to support that."

John Abbott, Vanier and Dawson Colleges already had programs that allowed students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to participate in student life on campus. Valerie Forde, a special education consultant for the secondary level at Riverside, felt the South Shore needed a similar inclusive program to help students make the transition to adulthood.

Two years later, in August 2005, the Post-secondary Alternative Community-based Education (PACE) program greeted its first six participants. Forde selected students from 18 to 21 years of age with pervasive developmental disabilities who had been integrated all their lives and needed the challenges that a new environment beyond secondary school could provide. They need to be independent enough to take public transit and attend class on their own. "When they're auditing courses at CEGEP, there won't be a shadow with them," she explains.

As part of this cooperative program, Riverside School Board hired teacher Patti Buchanan to coordinate the program and Victoria Greer as a work-study technician, while Champlain College supplied a room and college liaison Doreen Kelly to help the PACE program access college resources and arrange for students to audit courses. "She's been wonderful at opening doors," Buchanan says of Kelly.

Participants spend three days a week on campus auditing a course of their choice and developing their life and work skills with Buchanan and Greer. Each student has an individual transition plan that identifies his or her objectives, ranging from improving money skills to practising conversational French. There are also activities in the community, such as a trip to Chinatown or skating, and a weekly coffee club with guest speakers. Two days a week students have off-campus internships learning work skills at locations such as Winners, Krispy Kreme, Toys "R" Us and a seniors' residence. Greer offers the students support and monitors their progress during their placements.

"Although not academically strong, they handed in every assignment and wrote every test. It was above and beyond what was required of them."

PACE offers an all-around college experience, Forde says. "We wanted our students to participate in student life. That meant we needed students to be able to audit courses of their choice and participate in student activities. It wasn't just a physical presence at the college we wanted, but involvement." That seems to be happening, as other students drop by the PACE office to join in the activities.

PACE students have audited courses in sociology, algebra, nutrition, fitness and wellness, film studies, history of western civilization, Spanish and active living. They were not required to complete assignments and write exams, but one sociology instructor was surprised by their dedication. "She found the students were enthusiastic, motivated and involved in discussions in class," Buchanan says. "Although not academically strong, they handed in every assignment and wrote every test. It was above and beyond what was required of them."

Being in an inclusive environment helps them gain self-confidence, self-awareness, improved communication skills, autonomy and a feeling of greater control over their lives, Buchanan says. Its impact will extend beyond their time at Champlain. "They won't be afraid to go on the metro and into Montreal," she says. "They won't be afraid to go to the museum to see an art exhibit because they will have done that. They will learn how to read a bus schedule and will also feel a sense of achievement. They won't get college credit for the courses they audited, but they will be exposed to information and college life."

Sadly, Adam Taylor never got the opportunity to participate in the project he inspired. He was set to begin in January 2006, but lost his fight with leukemia on October 5, 2005. Adam's dream lives on, however, through the students in the PACE program.

In order to integrate students with learning difficulties into its regular classes, École secondaire Le Tremplin in Malartic field-tested a project aimed at improving the conditions for student success.

École secondaire Le Tremplin, in the Commission scolaire de l'Or-et-des-Bois, reviewed its school organization in order to meet the diverse needs of students living in a disadvantaged community.

Ginette Falardeau, the school principal, explains that the idea first came up in 2002, at meetings held by the vice-principal. "The aim of these meetings was to think about educational practices and analyze the organization of individualized paths for learning, in order to establish a shared vision of school organization that would adequately meet the diverse needs of our students."

"With the support of the school board we were able to benefit from the experience of our colleagues at the elementary level. We also wanted to ensure continuity and facilitate the transition from elementary school to secondary school. Educational services share our vision and are very supportive. Being in a small town facilitates integration. All the students know each other and want to continue on with their classmates."

According to Falardeau, her role is to help the school team create an atmosphere conducive to learning and the success of all students. "It is important to foster an atmosphere of sharing and cooperation, and to ensure that all staff members feel that they have the necessary support. In a project like this, which requires a reorganization of educational practices, it is not unusual to meet with a certain amount of resistance. This is a long-term project that requires the commitment and participation of the entire school. If we don't work together, we won't succeed."

"Measures have been taken to set up the conditions essential to the project's success. The schedule was changed to enable the necessary resources to meet for one hour a week. A 40-minute study period makes it possible to assist students in class. And the closing of a class of students in individualized paths for learning and funding from New Approaches, New Solutions allowed us to free up two resource teachers to provide support."

Gilberte Larose, a Secondary I teacher, recognizes the importance of a student-centred approach and observes that "the experience has been fulfilling, despite the fact that integration means facing a number of challenges and reorganizing educational practices."

"Today, teachers find themselves on the front line with students who have a wide variety of needs. This may undermine teachers' confidence in their abilities. For example, some teachers can feel helpless when they fail to motivate a student with certain difficulties. In such a situation, it is important to remember that a student's success does not depend on a single person and that there are always other resources in the school. It is very important to have the support of a resource teacher."

A resource and remedial teacher, Marie-Claire Piché has been involved in integration projects at the elementary level, including the Projet d'intervention des élèves à risque (PIER). "My role is to offer teachers the necessary support and assistance to ensure the student's success, by doing the following: offering workshops, helping develop adapted materials and helping implement innovative educational practices, for which a period in the schedule has been set aside."

"From the very beginning, we have relied on tutors to develop the different intervention plans. The tutor accompanies the student through the different stages of his or her progression through school. The tutor meets with parents, helps develop intervention plans and ensures that everyone in the school understands what is needed to foster the student's success," says resource teacher Stéphane Grégoire.

Falardeau adds: "Although we are flexible and open to difference, sometimes we need to review our definition of success. We had one Secondary I student with learning difficulties related to his social adaptation difficulties. The intervention plan enabled teachers and other staff members to provide him with the help and support he needed to overcome his problems. In a regular class, students with difficulties get a lot of stimulation. They work with the same texts and the same subject matter as other students their age. In addition, they are motivated to imitate their peers. Success can also be social in nature. Students integrated into regular classes are less isolated and less likely to gravitate toward other students with difficulties. They relate to other students their age, which improves their self-esteem. I believe that these students could not succeed in the same way if they were put into individualized paths for learning."

According to Réjean Godbout, an education consultant with the Commission scolaire de l'Or-et-des-Bois, his work is based on respect for the individual student. "The guidance-oriented approach makes it easier to implement a new type of school organization. The more we encourage students to make a commitment, the more successful we will be."

"Given the context and the many challenges they face, supporting teachers and other staff members can be a complex and arduous process. In order to create an environment that fosters the development of professional competencies, we must take each professional's career path into account. We enlisted the help of the regional services. For example, training in dyslexia given by one resource person enabled teachers to develop possible solutions. We must also promote cooperation and reflective practices to meet the diverse needs of the school community."

"We are familiar with ministry orientations, but there is a difference between theory and practice. Consequently, we must be flexible and prepared to share information with our peers in order to find new ways of doing things." ◀

Standing (from left to right): Marie-Claire Piché, Réjean Godbout, Stéphane Grégoire

Sitting: Gilberte Larose, Ginette Falardeau

At James Lyng High School in Montréal, evidence of students' work and achievements literally covers the walls of the hallways and classrooms. Carefully crafted minature tepees, part of a project on Native American traditions, are displayed on a long table. Posters detailing statistical information about World War II are mounted on the walls. Ensuring that students see the results of their efforts is one way the school is boosting self-confidence, self-esteem and success in its students.

Many of James Lyng's 330 students come from economically disadvantaged areas, explains school principal Wayne Commeford. About 28 per cent of students are from families living below the poverty line and some 60 per cent are from single-parent households. About 40 per cent of the students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities. "Many of these children don't have a history of success in school," says Commeford. "They don't have the support of their family and of the community."

Under NANS, the school has taken several steps to improve student graduation rates, to boost applications to postsecondary education programs and to foster more parental involvement. One that has garnered quite a bit of attention from researchers and the media is the creation of gender-based classrooms. Commeford explains that separating the boys and girls helps the young people focus more on their studies rather than on impressing the opposite sex. "It has helped the students develop a new persepctive on who they are and what they are capable of doing," he adds.

Different learning styles

It also makes it easier to adapt teaching methods to the different learning styles of young men and women. Commeford notes that scientists, through studies and even brain scans, are finding that boys and girls tend to learn in very different ways. Klara Bourne, an English language arts teacher with 26 years experience, says she sees these differences every day. "Boys like to get up and move, for example. They like to do hands-on, three-dimensional projects like map building. Girls will want to talk more, ask more questions." The gender-based classrooms allow Bourne to tailor her teaching methods to the group. When reading a novel, she may have the boys get up and act out scenes. The girls, on the other hand, might work as a team to research and discuss what life was like for the characters. "We're still teaching the same curriculum, but we're engaging them in different ways," says Bourne.

The school has also developed an integrated, project-based approach to teaching and learning, says Commeford. Each year, teachers decide on a theme, such as Endangered Species, for each cycle. The teachers then meet regularly to discuss how to bring that theme to life through all the different subjects. For Endangered Species, explains Commeford, the English language arts teacher will have students read articles on the subject. The science teacher will help students identify the ecology that supports these species. In math class, young people might work with statistical models to determine how fast a particular species is disappearing from the earth. At the end of the year, the students present their work at a "fair day," where they set up exhibits and answer questions. Students' work is then displayed in various places around the school.

Tapping into technology

Another key component on the NANS strategy has been the use of technology to improve student learning. The school has a large computer lab equipped with a "Smart Board," a sort of computerized white board that allows for improved communication and interaction between teachers and students. While sitting at an individual computer, a student will see on the screen what is written on the smart board. As well, the teacher can click on a small window displayed on the board and instantly see what is written on a student's computer screen. Ann Quesnel, who teaches senior math and Secondary I math, says the technology helps engage students in learning. "It's a great tool because it is so visual," she says. Students can literally create a graph or map out a problem on their computer and she can easily monitor and correct their work.

By creating and implementing these various programs and tools under the NANS strategy, James Lyng High School has created a new climate of success. Prior to NANS, about 65 per cent of students passed their final ministerial exams. Today, that rate is about 82 per cent. Four years ago, only about 17 per cent of students applied to postsecondary programs. The number is now at 74 per cent. Absenteeism has dropped from about 20 per cent per day to around six per cent. Parental involvement has also increased significantly. Before NANS, only one third of parents would attend parent-teacher conferences. Now, three quarters of all parents attend. "We've managed to engage students and their parents and support them in the challenges they face in learning," says Commeford.

Rural challenges

Many miles away from the bustle of Montréal, a new school day is starting at Pontiac High School (Western Québec School Board). Buses rumble towards the high school bringing about 500 students from the small communities that dot this area known for its farming and forestry industries. Just about all of the students speak English as their mother tongue and share a common culture. About 20 per cent of the school's population has been identified as special needs.

Under the NANS strategy, Pontiac High School has taken a three-pronged approach to improving success rates, based on performance, learning partnerships and delivery organization, says school principal Michel Dubeau. To evaluate and improve performance, the school assesses each student, through a variety of standardized tests, when they arrive at the school. Then, the teachers set goals for each student for each semester. These goals are recorded in a database developed by and for the school. The students have targets they aim to achieve and they record their successes (or failures) in the database. At the end of the semester, everyone—students, teachers and parents—can quickly see if progress is being made.

Bringing in the "A" Team

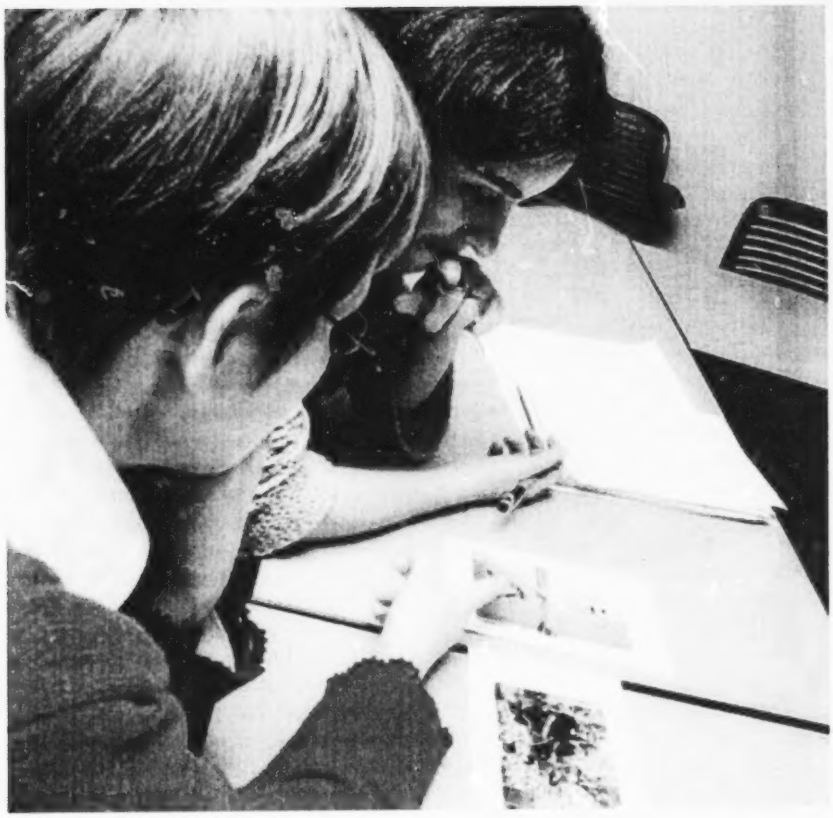
If a student's performance begins to flag, the school mobilizes its Achievement Team ("A" Team for short), which is made up of six teachers who work closely with underachieving students. The team meets with the young person every two weeks, setting goals and targets and monitoring progress.

"What we've done here is create a culture of success," says Dubeau. The school also encourages student participation and spirit through the creation of a house system. Each student is assigned to one of five different "houses" or groups. The houses earn points for study, spirit and sports.

This year, the school is extending the idea of partnerships and sharing to include teaching practices as well. As a pilot project, a small group of teachers has completed an inventory of their strengths and weaknesses as teachers. This information has been shared in the group and teachers are now pairing up with educators who can help them improve in certain areas. "We hope that in time the entire school will be doing this," says Dubeau.

The programs implemented under NANS have helped boost the success rate on ministerial exams to 87 per cent, up from 68 per cent four years ago. The average mark on the exams has jumped to 70.9, up from 62.7 in the years before NANS. Overall, Pontiac High's ranking among schools has jumped significantly, from 381 to 131. Close to 90 per cent of parents of students in Cycle I attend parent-teacher conferences.

"Our goal is to have every person reach his or her potential," says Dubeau. "By focusing on performance, learning partnerships and delivery organization, we've found a way to do that."



Children's literacy begins to develop in a variety of ways long before they start school. It emerges from their oral language development and their attempts to read (usually based on pictures) and write (generally through scribbling). New Zealand researcher Marie Clay coined the term emergent literacy in 1966. It refers to the earliest phases of literacy development, the period between birth and the time when children read and write conventionally. "Even extremely young children are in a phase of literacy," Shohet said.

The foundation for later reading success starts when children begin experimenting with oral language development and literacy in their first two years of life. Then it takes off as they start speaking more clearly and pretend to read favourite books by themselves, mainly reenacting the story from pictures. "Having memorized it, they can tell you the story without being able to read," Shohet explained.

They also experiment with writing by scribbling, making random strings of letters and wavy scribbles to imitate cursive writing. They will

scribble and tell you what the message says. It's not just scribblings. They "read" their printed messages.

Caregivers and parents need to promote literacy, Shohet said. Exposure to storybooks and other literacy materials as well as engaged learning activities help promote children's understanding of reading and writing. "If they're exposed to books, they're picking up the book and reading to you. It might be upside down, but they've seen [reading] done and are imitating it."

Engaged learning gets children actively involved in meaningful tasks and activities, promoting curiosity and stimulating new interests. These tasks allow children to show what they understand, explore different resources and assume growing responsibility for their own learning. "They treat it as something fun—not like it's work," Shohet said.

Continued literacy development, an understanding of literacy concepts and the efforts of parents, caregivers and teachers to promote literacy help children make the transition from emergent to conventional literacy. Once they begin kindergarten at the age of five and start more formal literacy, children's reading and writing skills continue to make rapid strides as long as they're exposed to literacy-rich environments.

Sam Boskey, from the Direction des politiques et des projets, Services à la communauté anglophone, MELS, chaired an afternoon roundtable discussion on English emergent literacy practices in the Montréal region.

Several early childhood educators said that getting parents involved in their offspring's emergent literacy could sometimes be a challenge. Some parents believe reading is the school's role, while others are immigrants who, themselves, have difficulty in English and French.

Denise Llewellyn, an education consultant with the Place Cartier Adult Education Centre at the Lester-B.-Pearson School Board, pointed out that the difficulty of getting parents involved could stem from socioeconomic rather than cultural issues. "When you take people who are not literate in their own country and they move to a new place where they may have trouble finding work, reading may not be a priority," she said. "But the bottom line is that everyone wants their kids to be successful. If you can get them to understand that and give them books, you can work with them."

Because Reading and Writing Begin Long Before a Child Starts School...

Participants came from a variety of backgrounds: public libraries, childcare centres, CLSCs, literacy and community education groups, community organizations offering family and children's services and, of course, schools. The cooperation of these different municipal, private, cultural and communications agencies was essential for the project's success. As François Blain pointed out in his opening speech, all of the participants had to work together to build the "reading community" that led to the creation of this program. The program management consultant at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport also observed that being ready to learn to read no longer coincides with starting school. This question has been given considerable thought in the past 10 years. We now know that steps need to be taken at home well before the child starts school. The general consensus today is that children should be introduced to books as soon as possible and that players from outside the school system need to be trained to take on the delicate task. The reason most of these experiments were conducted in disadvantaged areas is because they have a desperate need for services and lack the appropriate tools. It was therefore necessary to work on several fronts with a number of partners, changing attitudes and practices and integrating the vision into various services.

Practically speaking, 40 emergent literacy groups were created under the program. Some of these groups developed tools and structuring activities such as *Une naissance, un livre*, in which families are given a book on the occasion of the birth of a child. Longueuil adopted a reading charter in 2005. All of these activities were implemented in five areas of Montréal: Sainte-Marie, Montréal-Nord, Saint-Michel, Verdun and Parc-Extension. The local committee coordinators of the first three areas were on hand to share their experience, and we learned that all three set up book festivals and storytelling evenings, designed mascots and established innovative partnerships. Because they involve children, parents and educators, these approaches can all be qualified as *ecosystemic*. Today, the challenge for the committees is often ensuring steady funding and evaluating the results of the program.

Sainte-Marie, in south-central Montréal, where 55 per cent of the population is made up of low-income families, has three libraries and a program called *Mot à mot dans mon quartier*. In addition to the individual commitments of some partners, there have been joint projects. The neighbourhood has a cupboard full of equipment for running activities, as well as the adorable Kilitou, a mascot joey whose mother's pouch turns into a book. Three teachers have even written and published a story called *Une surprise pour Kilitou*, 3 400 copies of which have been distributed free of charge to families in the community.

Story Sacks: Stengthening Ties With Families

During the day we discovered other extremely stimulating projects, including the surprising *Story Sacks*. Inspired by a British teacher, this activity was implemented at Sainte-Bernadette-Soubirous school in Rosemont, where 62 per cent of students, say teachers Josée Hébert and Lyne Palardy, are immigrants. This reality was taken into account in the development of the program, which consists in sending students home with a sack containing teaching materials developed by the school-family team. The copyright-freed storybooks, audio recordings and games have all been translated into several languages: Arabic, Creole, Vietnamese, Chinese, etc. This initiative not only strengthened ties with families, it also helped establish relationships *within* families. Many parents admitted that it was the first time they had told their children a story. In addition to being a gesture of openness toward the culture of allophone families, the project has built bridges between French and other languages. A videotaped conversation with an Algerian family shows the parents' excitement about the story of Pichou, written by Ginette Anfousse Hébert. Even parents who do not read very much understand that they are essential partners in their children's learning.

In 2002, a trial was held in a school in Parc-Extension. This year, 17 school teams implemented a *Story Sacks* project in their community. Teachers have already observed a number of benefits, including the fact that each child is proud of his or her culture of origin. The real pleasure that the children take in reading with their parents and playing related games is obvious. And while audio recordings may help parents with little or no formal education gain confidence in their ability to read, meetings with parents to put the sacks together help break the isolation of many of them.

If you would like to implement the project in your school, the Supporting Montréal Schools Program can provide materials. Contact Martine Boucher at: boucher@cdeafc.ca.

Fighting Poverty Through Culture

A psychologist by training, Monique Tremblay worked for a number of years at Centre Saint-Pierre in the south-central district of Montréal. She has always been particularly aware of the obstacles poor families encounter in their everyday lives and the energy it takes to face up to them. In her workshop, she explained how culture can be integrated into these communities by determining the conditions required to reach parents and children. She spoke about the pleasure of reading and how it can be inculcated in a disadvantaged community.

In their struggle to get through hard times, poor families are not always able to address the vitally important needs of the soul. Dreams and desires in these families may lie dormant, dampening motivation to read and, indeed, the children often have tremendous difficulty learning to read and write. Many parents, who themselves have problems reading, cannot imagine being able to help them. That is why our first priority should be to read stories to both parents and children, starting with picture books if necessary. Daunting though it may sometimes seem, we cannot leave responsibility for reading entirely up to the school. Emphasis should be put on the enjoyment of reading rather than on its usefulness and on academic success. We must show that the joy of reading is an end in itself. In some cases, when everything comes together, parents make a new attempt at literacy, motivated by their children's enthusiasm.

Monique Tremblay is convinced that culture is one of humankind's basic needs. She insists that if reading and writing are important for all children, then there is no doubt that they are even more important for children in disadvantaged communities. It is important not to underestimate the importance of emergent literacy because other needs appear to be far more urgent. These ideas were further developed during the discussion period.

"It is with others that we discover the pleasure of reading and that we learn to read alone." On this note, the day ended, reminding everyone of the importance of building a "reading community."

A Constantly Evolving Project

"The program was based on the Ministère de l'Éducation's desire to ensure success for all," remembers Numa Landry of the Commission scolaire de la Beauce-Etchemin. "At first, it was aimed exclusively at parents and, more specifically, parents in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Studies had clearly shown—as they still do—that there is a connection between parents' involvement at school and their children's academic success. The educators then began meeting with children to prepare them for kindergarten, and the program opened up to less disadvantaged areas."

Practically speaking, the Passe-Partout program involves a series of eight to ten structured meetings with parents to give them a realistic view of school and to enable them to identify their skills. Sixteen sessions with the children help prepare them for kindergarten. These sessions are held during the day or in the evening, and address topics related to the parents' and children's needs. "The skills are there; we don't need to develop them!" says Numa Landry. "All we need to do is ensure that parents are proud of the skills they have," says Chantal Hamel of the Commission scolaire du Val-des-Cerfs. The educators have developed what they call a "positive bias" toward parents.

Parents themselves have had different types of experiences at school, sometimes negative, so we need to prevent their fears from being transmitted to their children. But, in any case, Daniel Allard of the Commission scolaire de la Riveraine believes that "parents need to be reassured. So many of them say that school stresses them out. Well, school stresses everyone out a little, so we need to know how to approach parents." The approach is essential. As is trust. Everything in the Passe-Partout program is based on quality relations. That is why each parent is allowed to progress at his or her own pace.

Changing Society

Like today's families and schools, the Passe-Partout program has evolved over time. "The program is so up to date that it can be easily integrated into the spirit of the education reform, which speaks of parent guides," says Julie Perras of the Commission scolaire de l'Énergie. "At first, we offered a lot of directed activities," says Numa Landry. "Now that students have an extremely full schedule, we have added more free-play activities." Another sign of the times is the involvement of fathers. "Fathers are not only seen more, they are participating more actively!" exclaims Julie Perras. Not only because fathers are increasingly invited to participate in the growing number of free-play activities, but

Members of the Passe-Partout working group: from left to right: Lise Hamel, Daniel Allard, Christiane Bourdages-Simpson, Julie Perras, Dominique Giroux, Numa Landry, Louise Picard and Chantal Hamel.

because they are more aware of the importance of their role as parents. "This awareness has grown considerably in the past 10 years," says Louise Picard of the Commission scolaire Pierre-Neveu, who plans sessions for fathers and their children. "Beside the fact that parents enrolled in the Passe-Partout program have a forum for sharing ideas, it is important to remember that they act as resource persons in their community."

A Wealth of Experience

Passe-Partout educators come from a variety of backgrounds and all have a wealth of experience to share. They are emotional about the close relationships parents form in their groups. They are also proud of the success of their projects, such as the libraries of books for preschool children that they show parents how to use. Louise Picard admits to having been asked by the school's speech therapist to share these "teaching" materials.

Of course, much of the educators' motivation stems from the fact that 73 per cent of children enrolled in the program obtain a secondary school diploma. Pretty impressive when you consider that this is higher than the graduation rate of children from communities that are very well-off.

A Unique and Flexible Program

While the program retains the flexibility needed to adapt to a variety of communities, helping parents participate actively in their children's success and helping children integrate harmoniously into school life, it must be pointed out that the Passe-Partout program is not in an expansion phase. The educators are well aware that their first priority must be the Passe-Partout communities although, with a bit more money, they would have enough ideas and initiatives for other areas. For now, they are focusing on ensuring that the organizational framework developed by the Direction générale de la formation des jeunes (DGFJ) in 2003 is applied properly. The Ministère confirmed in that framework that it recognized the importance of parents as partners in their children's academic success. At the same time, it asked schools to support parenting skills and to prepare children to enter kindergarten. So while it is true that parents need schools, it is also true that schools will always need parents!

"Passe-Partout educators have developed unique, valuable skills and unbelievable expertise that even their colleagues underestimate," says Christiane Bourdages-Simpson, who is in charge of the Preschool Education program at the DGFJ. She also believes that people don't realize the number of adaptations children need to make when they start school. "If we were to try to list them, we would be impressed, if not terrified! The same is true of establishing relationships with parents. There have been few studies in this area, even by education faculties. Our educators have made allies of parents. This expertise could be used in school at other levels and in other contexts." Dominique Giroux of the Commission scolaire de la Rivière-du-Nord concurs, stating that "Even after 25 years, some teachers have difficulty establishing contact with parents. It seems hard to believe, but it's true."

The educators' current mission is to continue their work while making an effort to earn more recognition and obtain a well-defined status. Right now, though, when they see parents who went to Passe-Partout sessions as children and who now want their own children to benefit from the experience, they are thrilled. Irrefutable proof that Passe-Partout works!

Projects Without Borders

Marie-Josée Lépine

"The project is divided into several stages," explains Corneau. "The first stage takes place in English class and the second, in visual arts class." The 10 Secondary II classes set up an environmental advertising agency. Then, in visual arts class, they illustrated their theme on paper grocery bags, which were used to bag groceries at a supermarket on April 22, Earth Day.

According to these teachers, it is essential that students convey positive values. They worked together to implement the project, which is essentially related to the broad area of learning *Environmental Awareness and Consumer Rights and Responsibilities*. With a view to promoting sustainable development, the aim of this broad area of learning is to encourage students to develop an active relationship with their environment while maintaining a critical attitude toward consumption and exploitation of the environment. With these objectives in mind, the teachers set their goals in order to encourage their students to adopt responsible behaviour. "We wanted the students to realize that they have a role to play in society, inside *and* outside the school. They also need to develop a sense of responsibility with respect to what is happening outside the school," says Corneau.

Experienced Environmentalists

"First," says the English teacher, "I wanted to pique the students' interest. They read several texts on the environment. Then, they formed groups of four and selected a theme that interested them. For example, some chose acid rain, the hole in the ozone layer, waste, etc."

Before they began researching online, the teacher encouraged them to share their ideas with the class. "I try to create a relaxing atmosphere in which students can express their ideas. This helps those who are less familiar with the subject."

Evaluation

The project enabled Corneau to evaluate her students' oral and written skills. "They had to explain the problem and possible solutions. They also had to be able to understand the phenomenon in order to explain it to the other students. They used creative thinking skills to propose possible solutions."

From English to Art

When the students got to art class with Carole Brisson, they were prepared. "I took over from the English teacher," she says. "I introduced them to environmental artists and showed them films from the National Film Board."

Then came the art portion of the project, which took several hours. The students made a realistic drawing of their theme. After having their drawing approved by the teacher, they reproduced it on a paper grocery bag and a white T-shirt. Then they added their environmental campaign slogan in English and French.

A supermarket agreed to use the bags to pack groceries on Earth Day. According to the delighted teachers, "a number of parents went to the market that day so that they could get their child's bag; some clients even came back for more!"

Two students were given the opportunity to accompany Corneau to the supermarket to see how their work was received. "They saw how they could help raise awareness through art and messages," says Carole Brisson. Corneau agrees: "The students felt that they were involved in something and that they were acting responsibly in the face of a real problem. They learned that they have power over their future."

On Earth Day, the students wore their T-shirts. "Just wearing the T-shirt helped them understand that they are conveying a message," says the visual arts teacher.

Motivated Teachers

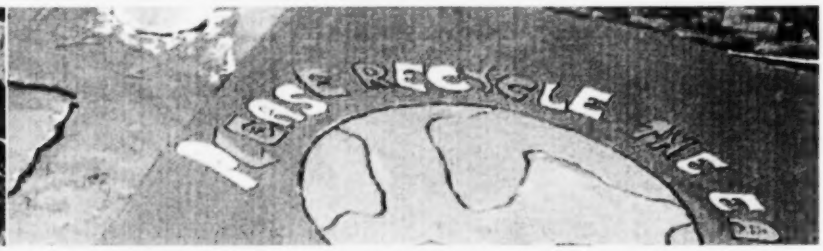
Both teachers agree: the project's success was the result of the synergy between them. They were concerned about sustainable development and they were fortunate enough to be working in a target school and to be given the time to undertake a project of this kind. As soon as Corneau had a free period, she joined the visual arts class to make her own grocery bag and T-shirt. "I worked with conviction," she says. "The students really felt that I was interested in what they were doing. They felt they were getting support. For myself, I got to play."

Positive Outcome

By working on a project directly related to the broad area of learning *Environmental Awareness and Consumer Rights and Responsibilities*, the students came into contact with a wide range of communications, intellectual and methodological cross-curricular competencies. "They learned about computers, finding and using information, solving problems and using their creative thinking skills. They also enriched their vocabulary and improved their knowledge about different types of texts. We achieved far more objectives related to cross-curricular competencies than we thought."

Looking to the Future

They have already decided to repeat the project next year, using reusable cloth bags. "We would like to focus on marketing by joining forces with a supermarket that is concerned about sustainable development. We would like to continue raising awareness about the environment and the planet and encouraging students to question what is going on."



From Theory to Practice and Back

Made up of academics and members of school boards, ORÉ is the result of world-wide education reforms. The issues addressed under these reforms are educational, of course, but cultural, ethical, political, economic, social and other aspects are also considered. The new roles and responsibilities of the resulting official reference frameworks can be confusing. That is why ORÉ wants to define a theoretical and practical rationale to support those involved in implementing the reforms. It takes into account the different subjects in an effort to anchor the reforms in their social, ethical, cultural, political and economic contexts.

ORÉ's general objective is to identify the foundational elements for the methodological construction, observation and systemic analysis of curricula. It is guided in its efforts by the following six orientations:

- the epistemological rationale for the reforms
- methodologies for developing curricula
- ethics education in the new programs
- the administrative management of the reforms' implementation
- the didactics of constructing knowledge and developing competencies
- adoption of the innovation by stakeholders

ORÉ works with several partners here and abroad, including Laurentian University in Ontario, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport du Québec (MELS), Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Agence universitaire de la francophonie (AUF), the Fonds Francophone des Inforoutes (FFI), the Ministère de l'Éducation de base, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the African Development Bank (ADB).

Examples of partnership projects:

- Development of a socioconstructivist approach integrating the contribution of cognition in the Ontario and Senegal programs (Laurentian University, Ontario Ministry of Education, IDRC)
- Support-research-training for the implementation of the Québec Education Program (MELS, UQTR)
- Support for creators of programs in the Québec adult basic general education curriculum (MELS, UQAM)
- Development of a means of analyzing essential competencies observed in work-related situations (SSHRC)
- Adoption of curriculum innovations (AUF, FFI, Ontario Ministry of Education, UQAM)
- Support for the reform of the basic education curriculum in Niger (Ministère de l'Éducation de base, CIDA, UQAM)
- Diagnosis of the Rwandan education system (UNESCO, ADB)
- Algerian national reform seminars (UNESCO)

Web site: **http://www.ore.uqam.ca**

The list of papers is available at <**http://www.ore.uqam.ca/lancement.asp**>.

A summary of Pierre Runner's and Linda Allal's communications and their slide presentations are available at <**http://www.ore.uqam.ca/qui.asp**>.

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